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“Final Greetings and Benediction” Philippians 4:21-23 Sermon

The closing of Paul’s letter uses language that was familiar to the ancient Greek letter writing of Paul’s day. The writer would begin and end the letter with a warm greeting. The greetings communicated a feeling of goodwill between the two parties. The writer framed the letter then with expressions of sincere care and of a desire that the letter would find the recipients well.

We see a similar thing here at the end of Paul’s letter to his beloved Philippians. Warm salutations are given in verses 21-22 as the verb translated “to greet” is used 3 times by Paul. The verb is implied a 4th time in the last half of verse 22; “Greet every saint in Christ Jesus. The brothers who are with me greet you. All the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar’s household [greet you]”

And then of course the closing benediction of grace from Christ draws us back to the introductory blessing of grace and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ in verse 2 of chapter 1. Though the form of Paul’s letter here at the end is very similar with what a Greek secular writer would have done we know that Paul was writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and therefore the typical language of the letter is infused with theological content and brings with it power for the Christian that other letters, using the same closing words, could not provide.

In this final section Paul sends his final greetings to the saints in Philippi and gives the church a benediction.

Paul had opened himself up in this letter. As this congregation listened to the words of Paul and began to approach this closing they would have already heard Paul say that he was thankful for them and that he expressed his thanks to God for them in all his prayers (Phil. 1:3-4). They would have heard him say of them, “*I hold you in my heart*” (v.7). They would have also been given a glimpse into the inner workings of Paul’s own heart when he talked about the possibility of his execution.

If he had to choose between living and dying he said, “*I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ for that is far better*” (v.23). They would have heard him say “*Even if I am to be poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all*” (ch.2:17).

By this point they would have heard Paul describe the Philippians as those whom he loved and longed for and that they were his joy and crown, his beloved (ch.4:1). They would have heard Paul highly commend them and give thanks to them for supplying his needs with the gifts they sent, gifts he called a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God (v.14-18). They would have heard all these things flow from Paul’s pen and then they would hear him say “*Greet every saint in Christ Jesus*”

It would have been as though Paul himself were standing there among them greeting them face to face. This was the intention of the apostle in this greeting; that perhaps the elders and the deacons, who he addressed at the beginning of the letter, would read this letter and essentially say to each member of the church, “Paul cares about you, and he sends his greetings to each one of you, as if he greeted each one of you by name”

A greeting like this communicates acceptance. Paul places his long series of greetings to individual people at the end of Romans within the context of welcoming a woman named Phoebe; *“I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church at Cenchreae, that you may welcome her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints...”* Then in the next verse he says, *“Greet Prisca and Aquila...Greet also the church in their house...”* and so on.

A greeting from Paul would have been mediated then by those who read the letter. The brightness of the reader’s face, a warm smile, and the affirming words would have communicated love and acceptance. This was the case with secular letters as well. But this is no bare greeting, full of empty platitudes, between individuals who know each other based on a temporary, earthly relationship.

Paul says *“Greet every saint in Christ Jesus”*. When we welcome and greet and show acceptance to one another *in Christ Jesus*, with affirming words and the brightness of our faces, we are reminded of the way in which God has accepted us in His Son Jesus Christ.

By the blood of His Son, our sins are forgiven. Through faith in Christ we have been adopted into God’s family. We have been united to Christ by faith, which is what the phrase *“in Christ Jesus”* refers to, our union with Christ. The bond we share then is eternal because we have been united to the risen and glorified Messiah who lives forevermore.

Therefore when we greet one another, we are reminded that we share an acceptance that is enjoyed not only in this life but in the age to come, and therefore a *permanent* acceptance. In the face of Christ God the Father has shone the light of His face upon us. In the gospel, for those who believe it and trust in His Son, God welcomes us.

This Divine welcoming is possible friends because the Father turned his face away from His Son Jesus Christ as He bled on the cross and as He became sin, our sin. We are accepted because Christ was rejected by His own people and by the world. This greeting is filled with power and grace then and we see this also in the fact that Paul calls his hearers *“saints in Christ Jesus”*.

The designation, the saints in Christ, refers to the end time people of God, about whom the OT prophets prophesied. The *“saints”* are the true people of God, made up of Jews and Gentiles, and centered upon their union with the Messiah.

We see this very clearly for example in Daniel 7. There Daniel is given a vision of one like a son of man who is presented before the Ancient of Days and he’s given a Kingdom that can never be destroyed, and Daniel is told that all peoples and nations would serve this son of man figure.

And then Daniel is given an interpretation of the vision, and he’s told that this kingdom would be given to the true people of God and what are they called there?

“And the Kingdom and the dominion and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven shall be given to the people of the saints of the Most High; his kingdom shall be an everlasting kingdom...”

The *“saints”* receive this kingdom because of their relationship to the son of man in the vision. This is who the Philippians are, this is who we are. We are *“the saints”* in Christ Jesus. We are those who have been delivered from this twisted and crooked age and who shine like lights in the world (Phil. 3:15). Paul sends his greetings to them.

This designation was probably meant to bolster Paul’s call to unity in the church. If we regard one another in this way then we are more likely to be humble and do what Paul called the church to do in ch.2:3; *“in humility, count others more significant than yourselves”*.

In Paul's day this would have hopefully included Euodia and Syntyche, the two women who were in a disagreement with one another.

Paul next sought to extend the Philippians' field of vision. This was not just a warm and theologically rich expression of acceptance and greeting between Paul and the Philippian church alone, but greetings that came from him and the brothers close to him; "*Greet every saint in Christ Jesus. The brothers who are with me greet you*" This included most likely those who worked closely with him while in prison, namely men like Timothy and Epaphroditus. But not only Paul and these brothers but all the saints who live in the city of his imprisonment; v.22 "*all the saints greet you*"

If the city where Paul was in prison was in fact Rome then "all the saints" referenced here may have included many of the specific names Paul sent his greetings to at the end of the letter to the Romans. Again Paul might be implicitly reinforcing the call to unity in Philippi by reminding them of their Spirit forged bond with all the saints in every place.

The bond we have friends transcends all geographical boundaries and all social distinctions therefore we should always strive for unity in the body. Paul makes sure to mention one more group of saints in v.22; "*All the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar's household*"

The saints mentioned here were slaves or freedmen who served in the household of the Roman Emperor. They were charged with civil duties and the management of some of the emperor's affairs. I think the point that Paul is making here is not what these saints were charged with in Caesar's house but the fact that the power of the gospel had penetrated into the very house of the supreme earthly leader of the largest, most powerful empire in the world at this time.

That there were "saints in Christ" who worshiped Christ and who sent their warm greetings to "the saints" in Philippi was evidence that Paul's chains had truly served to advance the gospel. Though Paul may have been bound the Word of God was not bound. The everlasting kingdom made up of the saints of the Most High and centered upon Jesus Christ continued to grow even as the mighty arm of the Roman Emperor had Paul in chains.

Friends this teaching is applicable at this time isn't it? We are all under house arrest essentially but remember the Word of God is not arrested, nor can it ever be. The gospel is still doing its work. The Kingdom continues to grow. We may be bound to our homes and we may be forced to temporarily conduct services online, apart from each other, but the Word of God is not bound.

And finally, Paul closes this letter with an apostolic benediction. A benediction is a pronouncement of blessing upon the hearers. And that this is an *apostolic* benediction means the pronouncement carries the full authority of God Himself. Through this ordained apostle and servant of Christ, God Himself, by the power of His Spirit, blesses the saints of God with benediction; v.23 "*the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit*"

In the OT, a benediction like this was given by the Aaronic priests. We see this in Numbers 6: "*The LORD bless you and keep you. The LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you. The LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace--so shall they put my name upon the people of Israel and I will bless them*" (Nu. 6:24-27)

This priestly benediction pointed to the grace of God shown toward His people through the sacrifices and to His abiding presence in the tabernacle. But in the NT, the benediction given through God's servants reaches a fuller and richer expression.

The Name of Christ is invoked by Paul in the benediction as the One who has put an end to the entire sacrificial system by offering Himself as a sacrifice. Christ as the true High Priest gives the benediction from the true temple in Heaven, and what is that blessing? Grace.

“The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit”. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ is the power of God that frees the saints of the Most High from sin and death. This renewing power is undeserved and unmerited, it comes to broken sinners who are at all times in need of grace. Paul said earlier in the letter that he wanted to know Christ and the power of His resurrection. In this benediction the Spirit of God works with the Word of God in the very hearts of the people of God, to give grace, power from the resurrected Christ. God spoke of grace and power when Paul asked to have the thorn in his side removed and God would not do this, saying to Paul, *“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness”*(2 Cor. 12:9).

By His Word, by this blessing, Christ applies the power of His resurrection in the spirits of the saints; *“grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit”* The word “spirit” here is in the singular and maybe served as a final appeal to unity. Though we each have individual souls we nevertheless share in the one Spirit and so each congregation can be said to have one “spirit”.

The grace of Christ thus subdues our pride, suppresses the drive toward envy and rivalry and instead creates peace and unity. The grace of Christ here comes to touch the inner being of the members in Philippi through the reading of this letter, and through Paul’s prayers, and they would have needed this grace separated as they were from their beloved apostle.

Friends for us, separated from each other as we are, this benediction is something we need as well. Christ commends that we continue to greet one another in Him during our time of isolation, and He sends His grace to you, that you and all the saints around the world would continue to confess Jesus Christ as Lord to the glory of God the Father.